

MBTA COMMUNITIES

ZONING FOR MULTIFAMILY HOUSING IN ARLINGTON



& Social Justice

Why does MBTA Communities Legislation 3A matter from a social justice perspective?

MBTA Communities Legislation 3A matters from a social justice perspective because of the history and context of housing in our local area, as well as in the whole of the United States. After the passage of state and local fair housing laws made discrimination in the sale and rental of housing on the basis of factors such as race, color, familial status, and sex illegal, zoning laws became a tool by which municipalities decided who was included and who was excluded from housing opportunities. The legacy of these earlier choices is still woven into the fabric of the Greater Boston Area today where there are substantial gaps between homeownership rates, approval for loans, and income between white residents and residents of color. The [MBTA Communities law was created in direct response to zoning laws that limit or prevent the construction of multi-family housing](#), which have produced high-cost, low density housing.

What is the history of multi-family housing development in Arlington?

The Town's first Zoning Bylaw, adopted in 1924, allowed for apartment construction in three large business zones along Massachusetts Avenue. Allowed apartment use was expanded in the years following World War II as Arlington, and other suburbs across the area, worked to accommodate new families and increase tax revenue. These multi-family homes can still be seen on Mass Avenue, although they could not be developed under today's zoning laws.

Following the desegregation movement and the passage of the Fair Housing Law, integration became a real prospect for Arlington and its suburban neighbors. The resulting tension created an increasingly organized anti-development movement in the 1960s and 1970s that employed both subtle and explicit racially discriminatory language to halt new apartment development. In 1975 the Town of Arlington instituted a year-long moratorium on new multi-family housing production, and the following year instituted a complex Zoning Bylaw that curtailed the ability to develop any type of housing that wasn't single family and higher cost. Along with restrictions on height, density, lot size and parking, the new bylaw also elevated the right of individual abutters, "essentially creating a new property right whole cloth: the right to exclude" ([Arlington Fair Housing Action Plan 2021](#)). This preference for single-family zoning has persisted throughout the decades, even expanding in the 1990s. Amending our current zoning means relegating the type of properties that were constructed during the earlier part of last century and providing opportunity to people who were historically excluded.



*For more information about the MBTA Communities process, visit
tinyurl.com/MBTACommunitiesArlington*

How does MBTA Communities intersect with the Town's equity goals?

In 2023 the Town of Arlington completed a Community Equity Audit. One recommendation is for the Town to “address restrictive policies for residential zoning districts in order to allow for desegregation” by removing “the requirement for a special permit to develop multifamily units” and allowing for “development of multifamily housing in the R0 and R1 zoning districts” (recommendation #12).

The Fair Housing Action Plan, completed in 2021, encourages the Town to “allow two-family development by right in nominally single-family districts where two-family dwellings were historically commonplace; allow three-family, townhouse, and multifamily housing options by right in districts nominally meant for them” and “ensure zoning complies with new state-level requirements for MBTA communities.”

Wouldn't it be more equitable to build affordable housing?

We need **all** types of housing to create a thriving housing market. The MBTA Communities legislation aims to produce “missing middle” housing, the housing stock between a detached single-family house and a big apartment building, as a key part of the housing puzzle. Without this community asset, anyone who makes a middle income cannot access the housing market in Arlington where the median cost of a home, according to available census data, was \$787,000 from 2017-2021, and rent was \$1,797 in the same period. Regardless of protected status, it would be difficult for the average Arlington household to afford a home in town today. The median salary of a Black or Latino household in our region (\$43,060 and \$43,882, respectively) is significantly below what is needed to own in Arlington. The current lack of missing middle housing has played a part in higher competition for properties, unattainable housing prices, and lack of movement across housing types, which negatively impacts our most burdened residents.

Why zone along Mass Avenue and Broadway, isn't that where most of the density already is?

The decision to zone along Mass Avenue follows the value of transit-oriented development and allows for more access to employment, retail, and services. There is a tension here: locating multi-family housing in areas where there are historical patterns of residents from the global majority could reinforce historic segregation, but there is also greater access to opportunity than in single-family neighborhoods. The current proposal is just one part of the solution; providing opportunities for additional housing throughout the town is an additional way to achieve greater equity.



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